

**Psalm 42:1-4**

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold the face of God?  
My tears have been my food day and night,  
while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'  
These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:  
how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God,  
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

**John 1:1-4**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

**John 1:9-13**

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

**What Color is a White Christmas?****Rev. Charles Schuster****December 21, 2008**

What is all the busyness about, why all the lights, the decorations, these plants, preparation, what' it all about? Derric Johnson in his book *The Wonder of Christmas* speaks of the busyness of Christmas. Four-year-old Becky wanted to play that December afternoon, and her mother brushed her aside and said, "Becky, just too busy today. Got to bake, rooms to clean, presents to buy, it's Christmas time, you know." So Becky played alone. Her father came home, his arms were full of boxes and bags, and she said, "Oh, for me?" and he said, "No, for later. It's Christmas time. Run on now." So Becky played alone. At the table at supper, her parents were so busy talking and planning. Grandpa and Grandma were coming, and relatives were coming, and Becky couldn't get their attention. Somehow she was reaching for the butter when her elbow hit the milk glass and the inevitable happened, milk everywhere. "Oh Becky, not tonight," said her mother. "It's Christmas time now. Go to your bed. Say your prayers, and I'll be there in a minute." So Becky went upstairs. Her mother walked into her room, and heard her say, "Oh God, forgive us our Christmases as we forgive those who Christmas against us."

Christmas. You know we do turn the noun into a verb. We Christmas, and we get Christmased against. It's a human thing, and it can make us crazy. It can go awry. It is the secular side of Christmas, and the reason for the secular side of Christmas, all the

busyness of Christmas, we put up lights to cover up the flaws of a house that's less than perfect. We wish for snow to cover up the landscape that is scarred and shaped by the accidents of nature. Our parties help us mend our broken relationships. Our music points us to how we wish it was. It's a natural thing, the brightness of Christmas, the whiteness of Christmas, it's a human thing, it's the secular part of Christmas, all the frenzy and the lights and the activities. We are working hard to Christmas against each other, hoping we will not be Christmased against, because we want to make Christmas bright, to make what's broken right.

We want to make Christmas bright, to make what's broken right. Just ask Israel Beilin. He was an expert on the bright Christmas, he was Jewish, and his father was the cantor at the synagogue, an important man, but his father died young, and Israel ran away from home and became a street singer in New York City. He noticed all the activities at Christmas and it impressed him, and it made him wonder what it was all about. He got a job at an Italian restaurant as a singer, and he started writing words to well-known tunes, and some of his own. This one song, he thought it was sort of silly, and he put it in his desk in a back drawer. One day there was a movie being made, and a famous movie star was looking for a song, and Israel Beilin pulled out his song. The movie star, when he read it, was insulted. He refused to sing it. It was a Christmas song written by a Jewish restaurant street singer, so silly. Israel's name on the score was misprinted. Israel became Irving. Irving Beilin became Irving Berlin. Somehow they got to Bing Crosby and he was persuaded to sing it. "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know. The treetops glisten, and children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow." It's a human thing, dreaming of a white Christmas, trying to make Christmas bright and white, to make what's broken right. We sing carols about Santa Claus and mistletoe. We sing songs about how "I'll be home for Christmas." Sleigh bells and jingle bells and figgy pudding and "we won't go until we get some" and "you'd better not pout, you'd better not shout."

Leo Buscaglia has written a book, *Seven Stories of Christmas Love*. When he was a teacher in an elementary school, the school custodian was a jolly large man who always played the role of Santa Claus. At Christmas, the day before the vacation began, the principal gathered all the teachers together and explained to Leo that he would need to play Santa Claus that year because the custodian was ill. Buscaglia couldn't imagine it. He was short and thin, he lacked the proper physique. He didn't want to let the children down, so he agreed, and he put on the Santa suit and they stuffed him with pillows. He was suspicious this would never work, and it surprised him when he entered the room and the children ran at him and took him down like a quarterback on a busted play, and he did his best "Ho-ho-ho" impersonation, and felt like he wasn't anything like the real Santa Claus. He was sure the kids would see right through him, but it didn't turn out that way. He said, "I felt awkward and tentative at the start, but I was soon caught up in the wonder of what was happening. I found myself believing that I was, and behaving in such a way as the kind old man himself. I became the giver of good things and the renewer of hope and the dispenser of magic, and for a while, I was sure I could actually make dreams into realities. I could turn the mundane into wonder, and I realized how powerful the symbol of Santa is. Most of the cars were gone when I went into the school parking lot, and I left

my Santa Claus where I had found it, draped over the principal's desk, and I was about to open the door of my car, I saw one of the children coming toward me, and he was devouring one of the candy canes I'd given him, and I yelled out to him, "How did you like Santa Claus?" "Oh," the little boy answered, "You were great, Mr. Buscaglia." I was stunned. They recognized me. They knew who I was all along. They didn't care that I wasn't the real Santa. Any symbol was fine for them, even a rather skinny ragged one."

He goes on to say, "When I find myself trying to deal with the pressures of time and all the trappings of a commercialized Christmas, I stop and recall what the children taught me that special day. It wasn't the Santa suit that makes for Santa. And I savored my own candy cane, like a child. I started for home, renewed and ready for the celebration."

It's the human part of Christmas. It's our effort to fix what is broken. It's the lights and the glitter, it's the white in the snow, it's the Christmas carols, it's Irving Berlin, he saw it. Bing Crosby finally sung it, and we listen to it. It's the human side of Christmas, the secular side of Christmas. We want to make Christmas bright, to make what's broken right, because sometimes it does. Sometimes it does.

But there's the other side of Christmas. We want to make Christmas bright, to make what's broken right. But the other side of Christmas is that part that never breaks. And to see it, we have to go slow or we'll miss it. It's the glow, it's the God side, it's the sacred side of Christmas. If we see it, we know the glow. It reminds us of something that never breaks, which we're apt to miss. We could. The sacred side of Christmas. One writer put it very well. "In the beginning was the word, and the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." He was in the world, and yet the world did not know him. Missed it. It's hard to see the sacred side. It's a glow, not a light. It's slow, it's not fast, but we seek it. The psalmist was right. "As a deer longs for a flowing stream, so my soul longs for God." It's so quiet. It's so subtle. It's the God part of Christmas. It's the sacred side. When Christmas is not a verb, it's the object of all our propositions, it's the reason to be. It's the very ground and essence of our being, it's the foundation of our faith, it's what we count on. It's what we trust, that something deep and abiding in the fabric of life will not break. It's slow, this glow, it's subtle, it's quiet, so sacred.

Peter Gomes was right when he said, "Any god can make something out of the exceptional and the extraordinary. It is our God who makes out of nothing, something. Who takes nowhere and makes it somewhere. Who takes nobody and makes them somebody." Willie Jennings is a Duke Seminary professor who teaches his students to treat the Gospel as a gift, not as an entitlement. He says God, through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, has made us citizens with the saints, members of the household of God. He says this is the full measure of God's generosity. We've been claimed by God, and that won't fail us.

As David mentioned this past week, our church provided a place for another church to mourn the death of a teenager who had committed suicide. Their church sanctuary wasn't large enough and we saw it as our sacred duty to invite them here. Those of us who were doing what we could to be of any help we might, became caught up in the grief and

sadness, and many of the young people and many of the teachers and adults in our church knew this young woman, a gifted athlete, a role model, bright future, good student, friends, family, she had it all. But something went horribly wrong, and here in this church we struggled trying to come to terms with it, and there seemed to be no easy answer, no answer. Through it all we realized the power of faith is not the answer to the question, but is the trust in God when the question seemed to elude us. And the love of this young woman which she gave and she received was not in vain. It continues. So much had been taken from us, but there was so much that was left. Friends whose lives were changed for good always would be. Teachers and coaches who realized what they had been taught by this young soul who was assigned to them as their student. Families who struggled with the question "Why?" have been brought into a new appreciation of the value of life and the sacredness of every moment. It comes down to this. What can we count on? What can we trust? What is still working for us? What will be forever right, when the world seems sometime so wrong. What can we say when there is so much uncertain? How can we prevent this from happening, when we're not sure why it happened? Is there something we can trust? Is there somewhere we can turn? Is there one thing that stands when everything else has fallen?

Tolstoy said, "Certain questions are put to humankind, not that people should answer them, but that they should spend a lifetime wrestling with them." Ministers are supposed to have answers, and often it's disappointing when we seem to have the same confusion that others have. A United Methodist preacher took his son fishing one day, his junior high aged son. When the fish weren't biting, and the two were in the boat, there's not much else to do but talk. "Dad, what's the toughest thing God ever had to do?" The question caught the preacher off guard, so he said, "Son, you must have thought about that question a lot, and since you're asking it, what do you think?" The boy replied, "Even though you're a minister, you really don't know much about God, do you?" And he continued: "Since taking science in school, I thought the creation of the world might be the hardest thing God ever tried to do, but in Sunday School we got to talking about some of the miracles, like Jesus' resurrection, his birth, and I thought, that might be the toughest thing God ever did. But after thinking more about it, and talking to some people, I've decided that no one really knows God well. So now I think the toughest thing God ever tried to do is to get us to understand who God is, and that God loves us." And in the quiet moment that followed, a dad looked at his boy and said, "I agree."

The one thing that is not broken in this world is love. I would have voted for the candle the way you did. And we see it at Christmas, in the love of God, in the word becoming flesh. God became one of us, trying to help us know God loves us. Hard things happen, but there is love, and love is tougher than the hardest things. Disappointments come, but there is love, and that raises our sights to the next challenge which we can overcome. Death is the inevitable end to life, but love outlives it, and life outlives it, to the point death has no sting, and is not the end. In the most unexpected places and in the most unlikely ways, the glow of God, the glory of God, it's subtle, it's slow, it's the sacred side, it's the God part of Christmas, and it does not break, and we can trust it. Christmas will come to us. We will see what is obvious. We'll light our candles. The secular side of Christmas, the human part, as we make Christmas bright, to make what is broken right.

And maybe, just maybe, if we're lucky, we'll see the sacred side, the glow of the child in the manger, and the word that is flesh, and the God who reminds us that some things are not broken, and in them we place our trust. The secular side, the sacred side, Christmas, white Christmas, may it come. May love come down this Christmas, so that it will be on earth as it is in heaven, and so that it will get through to us. So that it will get through to us who God is, and how much God loves us. We just need to hear that, and we will.